FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
FEBRUARY 17, 2002

WILDERNESS
John M. Buchanan

Lent is a time to begin again. Lent gives us time to pause and take stock: am I becoming the kind of person I want to become? Or am I letting things slide, giving way to the comfortable, the easiest way, the popular way? Do I stand for something I can be proud of? Lent is a good time to stand up and be counted ... Lent is a time for hope. Life doesn't have to be a time of discouragement. The Christian life is, in part, a decision to keep looking at the One who went through all we have to go through, who was buffeted even more that we are, who died and rose again.

John B. Coburn
Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts, retired

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

WILDERNESS
February 17, 2002

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Matthew 4:1-11

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness . . ."
Matthew 4:1 (NRSV)

Silence in us any voice but your own, O God. As we begin again the Lenten journey we have traveled so many times, walk with us. And be with us as we think and pray and struggle with the big issues of life and death and love and rebirth. Lead us, O God, to the light of resurrection, but first lead us into the wilderness—and there, startle us with your truth and your love and your promise to be with us always: in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

In one of the journals I was reading to prepare for Lent, the editor began with this provocative suggestion: "In an age of quick-fixes, fast food, instant gratification, and Internet communication, the Lenten tradition seems like an ancient practice that is out of step with the age. Lent promises no immediate result, no instant answer, no dazzling communication from on high. Rather Lent is a call to disciplined inquiry and patient searching after the presence of God" (*The Living Pulpit,* January–March 2000).

At no time do I feel more out of step with the culture around me than during Lent.

This church and many other Protestant churches these days have rediscovered and reestablished the ancient church custom of the imposition of ashes on the first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday. The ashes come from the burned palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration. They symbolize Jesus' suffering and death and our own mortality. As they are placed on your forehead, in the image of the cross, the person doing the imposing looks you in the eye and says, "From dust you have come and to dust you will return." It is, to say the least, sobering. "From dust you have come and to dust you will return." You don't hear that kind of talk much along the Magnificent Mile.

Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary, grew up in an evangelical family and not only didn't observe the ashes-on-the-forehead tradition but regarded it as a kind of Catholic mystery rite. He recalls, as I do, the day when his Catholic friends showed up in school with dirty foreheads, having been to early Mass. And he recalls, as I do, the sense that there was something peculiar but important going on, something for which we Protestants didn't have a word or a symbol, an "underlying seriousness" about this business, even if we didn't understand at the time what it was (*The Living Pulpit,* January–March 2000).

So last Wednesday, walking out of the building at 1:00 p.m., I was struck by the incongruity: two well-dressed young men, walking briskly down Michigan Avenue, on their way back to work—

with ashes on their foreheads—and then a middle-age woman, in a stylish coat, pausing at the perfume counter in Lord and Taylor, with the ashes of her mortality on her forehead.

It felt particularly abrupt this year, after all we have been through and following so close on the heels of Christmas. Lent is early this year. Christmas, it seems, was just a few days ago. My colleague, Dana Ferguson, in her Ash Wednesday sermon, struck just the right note by observing that after the darkness of September 11, the threats to our safety and security, the loss of so much, so many innocent lives, the lights and music and joy of Christmas were more precious than ever. And so it feels even more out of step and out of sync this year.

Lent is a time of intentional introspection and self-examination, a time to take a look at the lives we are living and gain some self awareness about where we are, where we are going, about where we may be compromising, or not living up to our best selves, or taking the easy way. Lent is a time to change—*repent* is the church word for it—and to allow the gift of God's forgiveness and grace to recreate us. It's a time that looks forward to the Sunday morning forty days from now when we will crowd into our pews again to sing and hear and affirm our trust in the boldest notion in the history of the world: that Jesus of Nazareth was God's only Son, that he lived and died for us and for our salvation, and that God raised him from the dead, and, therefore, death no longer has any power over us.

That's not an affirmation one can make lightly, casually. Easter requires some preparation, some homework. That's what Lent is, and Lent begins every year with the same story, the peculiar story of Jesus and the forty days in the wilderness and the appearance of Satan and the three tests, or temptations, as they are traditionally called.

Jesus is about thirty years old, just about the age when many people begin to have second thoughts about career, life direction, meaning, and vocation. He has a powerful experience of self-awareness when his cousin, John, baptizes him in the Jordan River, and in that baptism experience he suddenly knows the road ahead is different now—that he needs to be different. In his baptism, standing waist deep in the waters of the river, he experiences God's claim on his life. He hears a voice and he knows that he is God's Son, God's beloved. Now he must decide what to do, how to live out his new sense of God's claim. And it is precisely at that point that the story says he is led by the Spirit—the Spirit of God, that is—into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. That's important. It's not his idea to go on a wilderness trek to find himself. The Spirit leads him. This is part of whatever God has in mind, an important part of the whole process.

Wilderness. I think of the mountains of western Pennsylvania where I grew up, thickly wooded, underbrush so dense you have to hack your way through, so easy to become disoriented, lost, that you need a compass. I think of the wilderness of Virginia where the Union Army disappeared from sight for a long time. I think of Lewis and Clark looking out across vast stretches of terrain no white man had ever seen before. And so it was edifying and not a little disturbing to board a bus in Jerusalem to travel to Jericho—through the wilderness, endless stretches of absolutely arid, dry, rocky terrain, as far as the eye could see, not the tiniest sign of life, under a merciless baking sun.

Forty days Jesus was there—fasting. That's a very long time for those of us whose temperament is affected negatively by just a touch of hunger, those of us who in the middle of lunch find ourselves wondering what's for dinner. After forty days, he is famished and the tempter comes. Medieval art has created an image of Satan that is monstrous, foul, terrifying. Ancient literature portrays him as the Father of Lies, the essence of evil. Our brand of modern Christianity understands mostly that Satan is not so much a being, a person with horns, tail and pitchfork, as a symbol of the reality of evil.

In this story, he is not frightening so much as smooth, clever. In his fine novel *The Gospel According to the Son*, Norman Mailer has an intriguing retelling of the incident.

Jesus' hunger has become a "solemn emptiness of spirit." On the fortieth day, the visitor arrives.

> And he was as handsome as a prince. He had a gold ornament on a gold chain about his neck . . . and the hair of this prince was as long as my own and lustrous. He was dressed in robes of velvet that were as purple as late evening and he wore a crown as golden as the sun. . . . He introduced himself. I said to myself, "The Devil is the most beautiful creature God ever made."
>
> He looked at me fondly. His eyes were black marbles but there were lights within. He said, "Are you hungry? Are you in need of a drink?" And he brought forth a jug of wine and a leg of lamb, well cooked. . . . I refused his food . . . and [he] said, "But, of course, you have no need of food. Being the Son of God, you can easily command these stones to be bread."

Norman Mailer captures the ambiguity that surrounds the decisions you and I have to make every day, decisions Jesus made. Turning stones into bread isn't a bad idea. Accumulating political influence in order to implement your program is not bad. Nor is engaging in good public relations and marketing—which is what the Devil suggests Jesus try, by leaping from the pinnacle of the temple.

The temptations themselves are not to do terrible things—rob, cheat, steal, do public violence to innocent people. If there are crimes here, they are victimless crimes. What Jesus is tempted to do, as I understand it, is to take the easy way out, take the shortcuts, persuade by novelty rather than content, by sensation rather than the substance of his teaching and his life. Jesus' great temptation was a familiar one: to be less than God created him to be and wanted him to be, to compromise his own integrity and authenticity as God's man.

That struggle is what Lent out to be for us.

And it ought, in some way, take us to the wilderness, the place where we encounter uncertainty and doubt. There are, someone noted, no paths in the wilderness. To be there is to know what it means to be without direction.

That's a powerful image. That's what life feels like sometimes, a dry wilderness of ambiguity and uncertainty. As we look at the world, we want things to be simple, black and white, good and

evil, right and wrong. And sometimes in our own need for certainty, we make bad choices. Jesus, in the wilderness, had to live with ambiguity and, at the end, make choices, based not on proof or guarantees but based on his best instincts, his integrity, and his trust in God.

Who doesn't know what it is to experience uncertainty and doubt? Who doesn't know the longing for clarity and certainty? Who hasn't experienced the appeal of a religion, for instance, that has ready answers to every question, the comfort of a faith without the wilderness of ambiguity?

Living with religious ambiguity and uncertainty is our assignment for the future, I believe. It's not for everyone. I can hear the objections already. If we lose our sense of certainty, the absolution of our doctrines and creeds, if we let go of our certainty that ours is the only way—all will be lost.

I think the road ahead through a wilderness of confusing and now dangerous, competing faith claims will require us to open up, to listen to neighbors, to live with looser boundaries, to know what is absolutely essential, to live more loosely with all the rest, to ponder a God bigger than either our questions or answers, to do what Jesus did, in that forty days—namely reduce our faith to its essential core—to take our stand there and to live it out with everything we have and everything we are.

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor has written a wonderful essay "Tuning the E String" for the *Christian Century* magazine. She talks about finding her old psaltery, an ancient string instrument she had played as a young woman. Trying to tune the strings, she found a pitch pipe, played an E, and tried to tune the E string. Now if you've ever tried to tune an instrument, or been listening in as a musician tunes, you know that there's something almost physical about being out of tune; you can feel disharmony. When the string she was tuning "found E," she writes, "My whole body agreed. The note inside me and the note outside of me were the same note." And she reflects:

> Since I live with a lot of doubt, the tuning of the E string had a large effect on me. After years of seeking certainty about the things that cannot be seen, I have pretty much surrendered to the necessity of faith: that love will last, that goodness has power, that God is real. I cannot lay hand on any of these things any more that I can hold an E note up by the stem. Even when I am not searching for it, the note is there. It was real before I ever was and it will remain real long after I am gone.

My favorite part of the story about Jesus in the wilderness, the ambiguity and doubt, the hunger and the hard decisions, is in the very last verse. This is what is says: "The devil left him and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

It was a difficult time, a lonely time, a time of doubt and uncertainty, a time not unlike periods of life through which we must walk, a wilderness in which we suddenly and unexpectedly find ourselves.

Without warning, you find yourself unemployed, for instance, and you wake up in a wilderness, not knowing what to do, cut loose from your moorings.

Suddenly the relationship that has given your life meaning and purpose ends and you're lost.

Suddenly a dear one dies, a friend leaves. Suddenly your lifelong religion starts to shake and seem not nearly so certain.

Suddenly you find yourself wondering if your life has made any sense at all—wondering what you should do next.

I am cheered by the suggestion that the Spirit of God leads us into those wildernesses and after the struggle—the promise that angels come and minister to him, that God does come to us at the end of the day, the end of the wilderness.

Today it begins, a new Lenten journey. God bless us on our way. Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Dana Ferguson, Associate Pastor for Mission

We scan the heavens, O God, in search of your likeness, but we do not find it there. Instead, we find it on earth in Jesus Christ, not as the result of our search for you, but as the result of your search for us. We are prone to stray, but you always remain close enough to hear our cry. You endow us with gifts worthy of creatures made in your image. Yet you do not abandon us when we use them for our own purposes. Not only do you forgive us when we misuse what has been given to us, you pursue us with a love that will not let us stay away.

For the assurance that while we may be late in our repentance, it is not too late for your forgiveness, and the assurance that even though our love may let go of you, your love will never let go of us, we give you thanks.

We are tempted by the world in which we live. We live in a land rich in harvest, a culture steeped in learning, an economy famous for its technology, a political system envied for its democratic traditions. We may not be tempted to betray our God to own all the world's food, but we have been known to put more money towards the dinner bill than to feeding the hungry. We may not be willing to betray our God to control the world's people but we have been known to use our access to resources to protect and hoard our riches. The world you have set us in runs deeper than our wisdom and ranges wider than our understanding and yet you have put it in our hands, the hands of us who are flawed and fickle.

We see it lying there in the palm of our hands, almost wanting to give it back, to let you reshape it without giving us a say. But it is not ours to return. And so it is to you, who alone can raise up life where none has lived, that we turn.

In these days ahead, you have called us to reflection, and so we pray that you would help us be up to the task. Give us hearts stout with courage that we may not hide from the suffering of friend and foe. Give us shoulders broad with strength that we may walk with the wounded. Give us spirits quiet with humility that we may call forth new life in your name.

When this journey is done, call us forth from the wilderness, that we might reveal the source of our lives by the way we live them. Let us dedicate our harvest to the war on starvation; our learning to the war on ignorance; our technology to the war on misery; our democracy to the war on oppression. Let us intercede for these victims of injustice, if we dare. Call us forth to be with those whose souls and bodies need your soothing touch. Return them to us with your power that, through your presence, we might resurrect and restore, revive, and renew.

In all of this we pray that we may we be creators with you in life and conquerors with you in death. And we ask it in the name of the one through whom we know life, praying together as he taught the disciples saying, Our Father . . .